

# Surviving Ourselves

Understanding and  
Treating Vicarious Trauma

Reviving Our Sacred Legacy:  
Lighting the Path to Our Future  
Palm Springs, CA December 10, 2004

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## Credits

- Treating Compassion Fatigue, edited by Charles R. Figley, 2002
- Secondary Traumatic Stress, edited by B. Hudnall Stamm, 1999
- Transforming the Pain, a Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization, by Saakvitne, Pearlman, & Staff of TSI/CAAP, 1996.

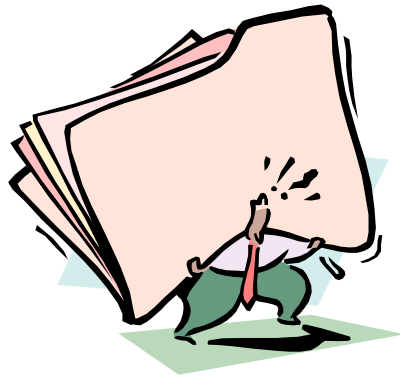


## A rose by any other name...

- Vicarious traumatization (VT)
- Secondary post traumatic stress reaction
- Secondary traumatic stress
- Secondary traumatic stress disorder
- Compassion fatigue
- Compassion stress
- Soul sadness
- Empathic strain
- Contact victimization

## A note about self care

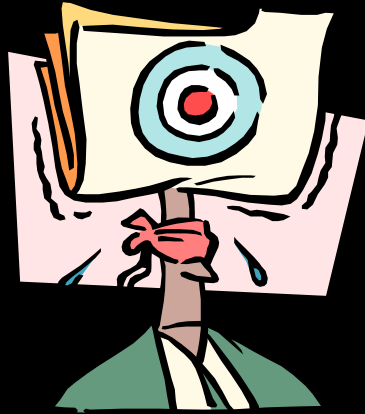
Please do it!



## Sharing with the Group

- What do you find particularly rewarding about your work?
- What do you find particularly stressful or distressing about your work?
- What does the pressure of your work sound like and where do you feel it in your body?
- Can you change it's tune?

## Vicarious Traumatization and the helper's experience



"I love my work, but lately I find it contaminating my personal life. I have nightmares about the horrible things I hear from clients, my sex life has deteriorated, I'm irritable and distractible, I'm afraid for my kids and tend to overprotect them and I don't trust anybody anymore. I don't know what is happening to me."

-A therapist

## Remembering...

You can't describe it unless you've seen it.  
You can't explain it unless you've done it.  
You can't imagine it unless you've been there.  
Then it never goes away.

-Bill Bessington, Retired Reporter  
Chugiak, Alaska



## When helping hurts

“There is a soul weariness that comes with caring. From daily doing business with the handiwork of fear. Sometimes it lives at the edges of one’s life, brushing against hope and barely making its presence known. At other times, it comes crashing in, overtaking one with its vivid images of another’s terror with its profound demands for attention; nightmares, strange fears, and generalized hopelessness.”

- B. Hudnall Stamm, Ph.D.



## VT: What it is

- A process that gradually worsens (Cherniss, 1980) that includes exposure to job strain (Courage & William, 1986) erosion of idealism (Freusenberger, 1986), a void of achievement (Pines & Maslach, 1980), and an accumulation of intense client contact (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).
- Can emerge suddenly and without warning
- Includes a sense of helplessness, confusion and isolation (Figley, 1995)
- Symptoms are often disconnected from the real causes
- Can persist for years after working with clients
- Changes one’s view of the self and the world



## What it isn't: Countertransference

- Countertransference:

The distortion of judgment on the part of the therapist due to the therapist's life experiences and is associated with his or her neurotic, unconscious reaction to the client's transference (Freud, 1959)


The process of seeing oneself in the client, of overidentifying with the client, or of meeting one's own needs through the client (Corey, 1991)



## What it isn't: Burnout


A state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long term involvement in emotionally demanding situations (Pines & Arnsion, 1988).

"Psychological exhaustion and diminished efficiency resulting from overwork or prolonged exposure to stress" (Webster).



## A comparison of PTSD and STSD

<p><b>A. Stressor</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others.</li> <li>2. The person's response involved "intense fear, helplessness, or horror"; an event such as:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. serious threat to self</li> <li>b. sudden destruction of one's environment</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<p><b>A. Stressor</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or the threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others.</li> <li>2. The person's response involved "intense fear, helplessness, or horror"; an event such as:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. serious threat to traumatized person (TP)</li> <li>b. sudden destruction of TP's environment</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
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## A comparison of PTSD and STSD

<p><b>D. Persistent Arousal</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Difficulty falling/staying asleep</li> <li>2. Irritability/outbursts of anger</li> <li>3. Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>4. Hyper vigilance for self</li> <li>5. Exaggerated startle response</li> <li>6. Physiologic reactivity to cues</li> </ol>	<p><b>D. Persistent Arousal</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Difficulty falling/staying asleep</li> <li>2. Irritability/outbursts of anger</li> <li>3. Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>4. Hyper vigilance for TP</li> <li>5. Exaggerated startle response</li> <li>6. Physiologic reactivity to cues</li> </ol>
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## A comparison of PTSD and STSD

### B. Reexperiencing

#### Traumatic event

1. Recollections of event
2. Dreams of the event
3. Sudden reexperiencing of the event
4. Distress over reminders of the event

### B. Reexperiencing

#### Traumatic event

1. Recollections of event/TP
2. Dreams of the event/TP
3. Sudden reexperiencing of the event/TP
4. Reminders of TP/event distressing



## A comparison of PTSD and STSD

### C. Avoidance/Numbing of reminders

1. Efforts to avoid thoughts/feelings
2. Efforts to avoid activities/situations
3. Physiologic amnesia
4. Diminished interest in significant activities
5. Detachment, estrangement from others
6. Diminished affect
7. Sense of foreshortened future

### C. Avoidance/Numbing of reminders

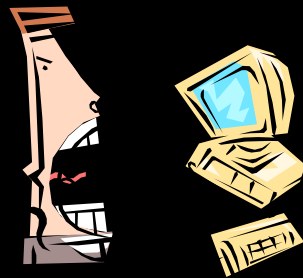
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Working with people who  
have been traumatized

changes a person  
forever

## Hatred and Violence



- “To study violence is to journey deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness”

– Joseph Conrad



## Trauma treatment

- Demanding and requires the use of one's self and a relationship with the client
- Necessitates both containment and often a re-visiting of painful issues
- Breaking through patterns of numbing, denial, acceptance of events and losses, grieving, making new meaning of the trauma



## Vulnerability

Our desire to help (the reason we're in the field to begin with) and the fact that we become emotionally involved by listening to the client's story (what makes us good at what we do), especially when accompanied by what we see as slow progress (and our disappointment in that), create the backdrop for VT.



## What is susceptible to trauma?

- World View
- Safety
- Dependency and trust
- Power
- Esteem
- Independence
- Intimacy



## World View: Disrupted Beliefs

- Beliefs about people as basically good
- Beliefs about a higher power
- Beliefs about ability to control self and others



## Safety

- Believing that one can keep oneself safe.
- Believing that one can keep others safe
- The need to feel secure and invulnerable to harm
- VT can increase feelings of vulnerability



## Dependency and Trust


Ability to trust oneself

Ability to trust others

Ability to depend upon others


Ability to depend upon self

To trust ones one perceptions and judgment that one can depend on others to have needs met



## Power

- To feel in control of one's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors



## Esteem

- To hold oneself in positive regard
- To value oneself and feel valued
- To value others.



## Independence

- To feel that one is able to care for oneself
- The ability to self-soothe



## Intimacy

- To tolerate time alone
- To take care of one's self lovingly
- To have close connections with others

**The first sign of a nervous breakdown is  
when you start thinking your work is  
terribly important**

-Milo Bloom

## Impact depends upon...

- Lack of competent supervision
- Lack of skill or knowledge
- Lack of understanding about ethical issues
- Lack of awareness of the impact of trauma on the helper
- Lack of administrative support
- Difficulty tolerating affect
- Social, Political, and Cultural context of original trauma, the TP and the helper
- Professional identity

# Transforming

## The Helplessness

## The ABCs of Addressing Trauma

### Awareness

Being attuned to ones own needs, limits, emotions, resources. Heeding all levels of awareness. Practicing mindfulness and acceptance.

### Balance

Among activities, professional and personal, within professional. Inner balance allows attention to all aspects of oneself.

### Connection

To oneself, others, something larger. Communication breaks the silence of unacknowledged pain. Offsets isolation, increases validation and hope.





## Awareness & Mindfulness Exercise

- Write down three ways in which you personally have noticed your work impacting your personal life
- Silently share with others in the room
- Be aware of your body before and after the exercise



## Two sides of the coin

- |                    |                     |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| ■ Going within     | ■ Expanding Out     |
| ■ Quieting         | ■ Getting silly     |
| ■ Peaceful         | ■ Being playful     |
| ■ Gathering wisdom | ■ Spontaneity       |
| ■ Inner strength   | ■ Laughter          |
| ■ Centering        | ■ Enjoying Life     |
| ■ Rejuvenating     | ■ Social Activities |




## Balance & Connection Exercise

- Relaxation
- Connect with your inner wisdom
- Remind yourself of this wisdom




## Expanding Out

- Recognize the hilarious and honor its place
- Ally McBeal Video Clip



In three realms of life

PROFESSIONAL  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
PERSONAL



Professional

- Supervision and consultation
- Scheduling client load and distribution
- Balance and variety in tasks
- Giving and receiving education
- Positive and comfortable workspace
- Supportive atmosphere



## Personal

- Making personal life a priority
- Personal psychotherapy
- Leisure activities
- Spiritual well-being
- Nurture all aspects of oneself: physical, emotional, spiritual, interpersonal, creative, artistic
- Attention to health



## Organizational

- Collegial support
- Forums to address VT
- Supervision availability
- Respect for clinicians (helper) and client
- Resources: mental health benefits, space, time



## Trauma in the work environment

- 77% of CPS workers report that they have experienced threats or assaults on the job (Woodard Meyers & Cornille, 2000).
- Mandatory defense training
- Buddy system
- Code system
- Administrative support
- Psychotherapy when needed



## Creating & Recognizing your support system

- Cheerleaders
- Mentors



## In All Realms

- Mindfulness and self awareness
- self-nurturance
- Balance: work, rest, play
- Meaning and connection



## Strategies within the personal framework

- Take time to laugh, have fun, socialize
- Seek spiritual renewal
- Emphasize self care and self nurturing activities
- Consider personal counseling
- Take sabbaticals from trauma work
- Take mental health breaks purposefully
- Develop hobbies, sports, creative interests
- Develop restful, meditative activities (yoga, music, reading, gardening)
- Nurture supportive relationships and roles for self outside of work
- Guard against addictive behaviors
- Be restful, fit, eat well
- Nurture sense of joy, grace, beauty and connection in your life
- Connect with community, friends
- Seek out experiences which instill comfort & hope
- Set clear boundaries between home and work (use clothing, rituals to mark change from work to leisure or home)

## What Real Helpers have told me works for them

- Running
- Walking the dog
- Long baths with candles and bubbles
- Eating slowly and purposefully
- Reading
- Biking
- Hiking
- Karate
- Journaling
- Singing
- Long showers
- Sex
- Massage
- Community service
- Baking
- Workshops
- Taught
- Referred out
- Engaged in social action
- Became an administrator
- Took a sabbatical
- Took a vacation
- Breaks during the day
- Personal psychotherapy
- Time with friends

## Making a change

- We must be willing to let go of this life in order to have the life that is waiting for us.

— Joseph Campbell





## Letting Go of Stress

- Accepting and honoring our coping mechanisms
- And then letting them go
- The Joy of Stress Video Clip



## Self Report Inventories

- Compassion Fatigue Self-Test (CFST) for Psychotherapists (Figley, 1995).
- The TSI Belief Scale (TSI-BLS) (Pearlman, 1996).
- The Secondary Trauma Questionnaire (STQ) (Motta et al., 2001).





## For additional information

- Sidran Institute Traumatic Stress Education and Advocacy at [www.Sidran.org](http://www.Sidran.org)
- Traumatic Stress Institute/Center for Adult and Adolescent Psychotherapy at [www.tsicaap.com](http://www.tsicaap.com)